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IS GREAT LITERATURE INTELLIGIBLE?

BY HARRY T. BAKER

Most periodicals are conducted on the principle that all of their contents shall be intelligible to the average reader. Naturally, this excludes a good deal of important matter. Indeed, it excludes some of the greatest literature of any period; for great authors, including Kipling in the present generation, expect the reader to possess sufficient imagination, intelligence, and sympathy to meet them on their own level. As Ruskin put it, in *Sesame and Lilies*, we must make ourselves worthy of the kingdom of literature in order to be free of it. We must not ask ourselves, Does the writer agree with me? but, How can I make myself fit to understand his words and to heed them? No vile or vulgar person, added Ruskin, can enter the kingdom. The object of great writers is not wholly to please. In fact, in the case of Ruskin himself, and of Carlyle and Swift, it was to denounce and to warn. And all three are to some degree and in some passages or whole works—for example, Swift's social satire, *A Modest Proposal*—unintelligible to stupidly conventional people. The fault lies with the reader, however. He must make himself worthy to understand. To this end, he needs the guidance of a teacher. No doubt, there is plenty of bad teaching, where the blind leads the blind. None the less, the best literature must be taught if it is to be apprehended; and our best schools and colleges justify themselves by their fruits. A literary background, often supplemented by specific instruction, is necessary to the complete understanding and enjoyment of literature.

Gulliver's Travels, for example, is interesting to children; but even the average adult often misses its best and most penetrating social satire. He may miss the ridicule of pedantry in the conduct and beliefs of the philosophers of

Lagado, in the third book, or the profound satire on the fear of death in the description of the revolting prolongation of the natural threescore years and ten in the case of the immortals or Struldbrugs, who are detested by all normal people in their country. Still less may the average reader understand the contrast, by implication, between Swift's ideal race, the Houyhnhnms, and ordinary human beings. Even men who were themselves authors of note, like Thackeray, have failed to perceive that Swift, far from being a monster, was an unwavering idealist; that his vision of human perfectibility in the fourth book of *Gulliver* is one of the most inspiring as well as one of the wisest ever penned. Swift is one of the best of authors by whom to gauge the intellectual limitations of a reader. And, since *Gulliver* is one of the half dozen really great works of prose in the English language, it is important that as many of us as possible should be brought to a fuller comprehension of the wisdom and literary genius of Swift. Addison and Steele yield themselves much more readily to the superficial student; but neither was so great a thinker or so great a genius as Swift. Their literary riches are more easily accessible—and correspondingly less valuable. Swift knew how to write plainly—witness his *Drapier's Letters* and his other political pamphlets—but his more profound speculations in *Gulliver* and the *Tale of a Tub* require more of the reader.

No one can understand Ruskin, in *The Crown of Wild Olive* or *Unto This Last*, without ascertaining that he was a passionate lover of beauty and a hater of materialism and of all forms of social injustice. He detested railroads in beautiful valleys because they destroyed much of the beauty of the scenery; he hated the factory system and the introduction of machinery because they made labor mechanical and unenjoyable. Ruskin, being destitute of a sense of humor, was often unreasonable in his demands; but he was always eloquent, and always a master of that wonderful stringed instrument, English prose. What a stroke of genius, both in thought and expression, is his enumeration of the qualities, in *Unto This Last*, whereby one becomes rich or poor. It has to a remarkable degree that vital literary characteristic, power of suggestion:

In a community regulated only by laws of demand and supply, but protected from open violence, the persons who become rich are, generally speaking, industrious, resolute, proud, covetous, prompt,

methodical, sensible, unimaginative, insensitive, and ignorant. The persons who remain poor are the entirely foolish, the entirely wise, the idle, the reckless, the humble, the thoughtful, the dull, the imaginative, the sensitive, the well-informed, the improvident, the irregularly and impulsively wicked, the clumsy knave, the open thief, and the entirely merciful, just, and godly person.

Superficial and prejudiced observers have set Ruskin down as a mere fanatic or a hysterical babbler; he was considered also, after *Modern Painters*, a "fine writer," which meant, he indignantly declared, "that no one need mind what I say." In reality, as Mr. J. A. Hobson has shown us in his wise volume, Ruskin was a singularly acute and profound social reformer; and one of his chief "faults" was that he was half a century, and in some views a whole century, ahead of his period. We are just catching up with Ruskin. He needs less explanation now than in his own time; but he is still too rapid and imaginative in the evolution of his thought for minds occupied with commercial problems or minds naturally dull. It is a misfortune, however, to fail to understand John Ruskin. It is not remarkable, but pitiable, that the publication of *Unto This Last* in the *Cornhill Magazine* about 1860 should have resulted in almost universal condemnation. Thackeray, who was then editing the magazine, wrote after the appearance of three instalments that the papers were so widely disliked that he could admit but one more. Carlyle, who, it will be remembered, thought England populated mostly by fools, pronounced a wise and favorable verdict which later criticism has for the most part confirmed: "Not one doctrine that I can intrinsically dissent from or count other than salutary in the extreme, and pressingly needed in England above all." Carlyle against the multitude is enough.

The most profitable method of studying literature is by periods: Ruskin, Carlyle, Arnold, Browning, Tennyson together; Swift, Addison, Steele, Defoe, Pope together; Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher together. This implies study of the social, political, religious movements of these periods, the ideas in common and the ideas in contrast which these writers held, the spirit and atmosphere of each period, its attitude to reason versus emotion, to romance, to natural science, to commerce—especially in America at the present time. Each new author is a new problem, too. The rules of literary success cannot, except within narrow limits, be codified. Hence the young Kipling

requires fresh eyes for right appraisal; it will not do to look through the misty spectacles of the past. All this means exercise of a reader's brain, exercise of his power of sympathy and adaptation, a test of his openness of mind. Only a minority of magazine readers can meet successfully such a variety of tests; and therefore the canny editor regretfully denies them some of the highest flights of literary genius. It is unfortunate, but it is so. Anything that runs sharply counter to received opinion is dangerous magazine material. Even a great name is not always sufficient to calm the ruffled sensibilities of commonplace subscribers. The question of familiarity with a former literary period does not enter here—though it might induce a proper humility. The advice of little tinkling Tom Moore, for example, to Byron to “beware of Shelley's skeptical opinions” sounds humorous to-day; for in the moral scale Shelley is now rated somewhat higher than the noble lord. Misunderstood and persecuted in his own generation, he is at last recognized as at least much more unselfish and more devoted to the good of humanity than Byron. Some great literature, some great men, are in the nature of things partly or temporarily unintelligible.

Culture, then, involves a willingness to learn, not merely a demand to be pleased. It is a growing and a becoming; it is, as its great apostle, Arnold, pointed out, a familiarity with “the best that is known and thought in the world.” An enjoyment of even the most humorous essays of Lamb implies a background of culture; and Arnold himself suavely takes for granted a complete devotion to Homer and the other chief glories of ancient classical civilization! In an age of vocational training and colleges of commerce, this is an almost insulting assumption to some of our “best people.” Shakespeare, too, though not himself a university man, absorbed much of this classical culture and evidently thought it valuable. Keats ramped through Lemprière's classical dictionary, says one of his biographers, like a colt at pasture. And Browning, Kipling, and others have voyaged through strange seas of thought in an English dictionary, merely to discover new riches of their own tongue. With resources so much greater than those of the commonplace reader, then, is it at all wonderful that they should at times be “unintelligible”? There is no royal road to the understanding and appreciation of the best literature; one must prepare and always prepare. “The readiness is all.”

Shakespeare, who shows so much, shows several separate elements of appeal which warrant the optimistic statement that even the commonplace reader or hearer can get enough to make him appreciative. There are skilfully elaborated plot, entirely natural and complete character delineation, a wise and tolerant philosophy of life, an indescribable deftness of phrase—"the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand"—and a perfect adaptation to the stage, to immediate effect on an average audience. Shakespeare's plays, it cannot be too often repeated, were written to be acted, not to be read. Academic critics have been long in assenting to this cardinal principle; but Shakespeare has little in common with academic persons. No writer was less a pedant.

How much does the casual theater-goer understand of *Hamlet*? Certainly not the mystic's attitude to life, nor more than half the reasons for Hamlet's so often postponed revenge. Shakespeare is much more obscure here than usual; but the obscurity is due to the subject. Hamlet has a profound and an unusual intellect, compounded of many simples. He is in a morbid state—he assures us of that himself—but he is not insane. In fact, as Lowell pointed out, to make him insane would be unthinkable, for we should then have a tragedy with an irresponsible hero; and Shakespeare knew long before this how to construct a tragedy. Hamlet loves Ophelia, but gives her up because her timid and conventional nature can be of no service to him in his great task of avenging his father. He detests Polonius because Polonius is a bore,—commonplace, garrulous, full of wise saws but with no ideas of his own. Not all of these things can be grasped by the average reader or playgoer, yet he can grasp enough to fascinate him; and a second or third reading or attendance at the theater will bring him new riches. Indeed, the most useful single test of the distinction between mediocre literature and great literature is that of ascertaining whether one's appreciation of any piece of writing is enhanced or diminished upon rereading. Not even the most intelligent reader can exhaust Shakespeare at a first perusal; but he can exhaust a modern detective story thus; for, the mystery once unraveled, there is little else to ponder over. Shakespeare leaves that impression of infinity which is possible only to the greatest artists. In the realm of wit, Falstaff—the Falstaff of the two parts of *Henry IV*, not of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—leaves the same impression of the inexhaustible.

The casual reader, however, will fail to perceive what Professor A. C. Bradley has affirmed: that Shakespeare created in Falstaff so extraordinarily attractive a figure that when he wished to get rid of him, upon the crowning of Prince Hal, he could not do so without displeasing the audience. We do not readily forgive Henry's treatment of his old companion. Falstaff may have had within him an intolerable deal of sack, but he also had much more of the milk of human kindness than the cold-hearted and calculating young monarch. Professor Bradley's analysis of this problem makes us realize that in Shakespeare there is frequently much more than meets the eye. His essay, by the way, reprinted in *Oxford Studies in Poetry*, was originally published under the title, *The Rejection of Falstaff*, in the *Fortnightly Review*, a periodical which has done much to further the cause of literature.

Poetry is in general more difficult of comprehension and of full appreciation than is prose. It requires more imagination, more idealism, more acquaintance with the subtleties of melody and movement, and with condensed and heightened phrase. College girls are more acute than college boys in fathoming the mysteries of verse; the boys, especially in our democratic State universities, are too materialistic; their spirits are dragged away only with difficulty from the too, too solid flesh of this world. Poetry moves in a diviner air. Among the evils which would have come upon a Prussianized globe would have been the diminution of great poetry; for it has nothing in common with triumphant materialism and the worship of the goddess Espionage. American commercialism, too, is hostile to the muses. Philistinism, the devotion of all one's energies to money-making and to the grossly material things of life, is, like materialistic science, the very opposite of a poetic attitude. It was Coleridge who declared that the opposite of poetry is not prose, but science. Not all modern science, however, is materialistic; and Kipling, in *M'Andrew's Hymn*, has sung the song of steam. His exquisite prose poem, the short story *They* (in *Traffics and Discoveries*) even introduces some technical chat about a motor car. Yet what poetry there is in his phrase anent the joy of motion in this modern machine: "I let the county flow under my wheels."

It must not be supposed, however, that poetry is a mere glorification of form, of apt expression. All great poetry is

wise; it is what Arnold called a "criticism of life." When Keats said that beauty is truth, truth beauty, he uttered a great idea: that what the artist creates (beauty) is as true as real life. Shakespeare's creations of the imagination—Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, Imogen, Cordelia, Antony—are as real as the man who walks down the street. The struggles of young thinkers over religious problems, in the Victorian era, are best portrayed and discussed in poetry, the poetry of Arnold, Tennyson (particularly *In Memoriam*) and Browning. *Rabbi Ben Ezra* is the best statement, in condensed form, of triumphant religious faith that we have in literature. It is alone enough to justify poetry as a criticism of life. This poem presents, however, difficulties of expression due to its very effort at condensation. Browning was too prone to believe that his reader could follow all of his short-cut expressions. As one of his critics says, he climbed a ladder from one idea to another and then kicked away the ladder. The reader is therefore put to some trouble to replace it. In the first of the following stanzas, the difficulty is due chiefly to the postponement of the verb to the second stanza:

Not that, amassing flowers,
Youth sighed, "Which rose make ours,
"Which lily leave and then as best recall?"
Not that, admiring stars,
It yearned, "Nor Jove nor Mars;
"Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends them all!"

Not for such hopes and fears
Annulling youth's brief years,
Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!

In the final line there is the additional difficulty of the omission of a verb: "That would be folly wide of the mark." This brief, pregnant fashion of phrasing, this crowding of language, grew upon Shakespeare also in his later plays. *Antony and Cleopatra* is full at once of felicities and puzzles, some of them "as indistinct as water is in water."

Yet who would have it otherwise? Poetic magic escapes, in any attempt to paraphrase it. It can be stated only in its own words. As excellent critics have declared with heat, no school exercise is so futile as that of "explaining" poetry in a prose paraphrase. There is no equivalence; for no two specimens of form are equivalent. What began as poetry ends as mere pedantry. The thought and the form in which

it is couched cannot be discussed separately; they fuse in the heat of composition and, like the Liberty and Union of Webster's great speech, become one and inseparable. Some tripping meters are obviously adapted, too, to light or humorous subjects; blank verse, to serious and dignified ones. Shakespeare wrote nearly all of his humorous scenes in prose; and sometimes he mixed prose and verse in the same scene. As Professor C. T. Winchester points out in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*,¹ there is a ludicrous failure to adapt meter to theme in the following stanza of a hymn, where solemn thought is conveyed in a music-hall jingle:

How tedious and tasteless the hours
 When Jesus no longer I see.
 Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers
 Have all lost their sweetness to me.

It is a movement, says Professor Winchester, "which suggests Sir Toby's resolve to 'go to church in a galliard and come home in a coranto'."

The sonorous opening of Lincoln's *Gettysburg Speech*, "Fourscore and seven years ago," is not equivalent to eighty-seven years ago! Prose hath her harmonies, no less than poetry. It is such subtleties that make up the full effect of literary expression. "Victuals" is not equivalent to "food"; "deathlessness" is not the same as "immortality"—as Lowell showed when he suggested that we try converting Wordsworth's title, *Intimations of Immortality*, into *Hints of Deathlessness*. Wordsworth, however, does not reveal so many difficulties as Browning or Shakespeare. His difficulty, to a reader of his own time, lay chiefly in the novelty of his attitude to nature, an attitude now so largely adopted by other writers as to be intelligible to the multitude. His doctrine of the Divine Immanence, the presence of God in His world, is perhaps the most important single contribution to modern theology. The quotation in which it first occurs, from *Tintern Abbey*, is so hackneyed as to need no repetition. But Wordsworth, like so many other great men, was so far in advance of his age that until 1830 (and the *Lyrical Ballads*, containing *Tintern Abbey*, were published in 1798) he achieved little popularity. Hazlitt, that penetrating and enthusiastic critic, was one of the first to discover and proclaim him to a reluctant public. The hyperbole of this state-

¹ Page 255.

ment, from one of Wordsworth's early poems, *The Tables Turned*, may well have given pause to a Philistine of 1798:

One impulse from a vernal wood
 May teach you more of man,
 Of moral evil and of good,
 Than all the sages can.

But the simplicity of expression is all that could be desired; and this simplicity is characteristic of most of Wordsworth's best work—the work of those short ten years to 1808 beyond which the flame of his genius seemed quickly to dwindle and flicker. One of the few consolations of growing old, however, is that forty and sixty always appreciate the poetry of Wordsworth more than twenty. The obvious brilliancies of Byron are almost always more engaging to youth than the grave meditateness of him who knew the presences of the hills and the impressive unity of all nature—which he has recorded in those wonderful lines, full of Miltonic organ music and Miltonic grandeur of style:

The immeasurable height
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
 And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
 Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream
 The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of Eternity,
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

The Simplon Pass, which gives these lines their title, was never so described before.

Wordsworth is one of the best illustrations of the principle that no great literature is intelligible until the reader asks himself these two questions: What was this author trying to do? Has he done it successfully? One can never substitute with profit the question, What ought he to have been trying to do? The reader must first give himself up as a disciple—which does not imply, however, a surrender of

all the functions of criticism. Jeffrey was ridiculous because he thought himself competent to direct Wordsworth's purposes as a poet. He failed to comprehend the nature poems because he constantly substituted his own attitude to nature for Wordsworth's. The combination of realism and romanticism, too, in Wordsworth's best work, such as *The Leech-Gatherer* (later entitled *Resolution and Independence*) puzzled the Caledonian understanding of this self-appointed Jove. Yet Shakespeare had already done something similar, on a larger scale, in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The influence of nature, both through immediate experience and through memory, upon human character is another somewhat difficult element in Wordsworth. It is referred to in *Tintern Abbey* and repeated in various later poems. Doubtless this influence was much greater upon the author himself than upon even the most modern reader; but there was no reason why it should have been either misunderstood or ridiculed—no reason save the commonplaceness of ordinary human nature. The successful editor never loses sight of this commonplaceness. His chief problem is to remain conscious of it and still be an optimist.

Perhaps Wordsworth, like most great authors, often dealt with what we call the supernatural. This is a frequent and fruitful source of difficulty to the average reader. Poe dealt with it continually, and chiefly with its horrifying side. Kipling, in his later period, has shown a fondness for it: in *The Brushwood Boy*, *They*, *Wireless*, *The Dog Hervey*, *Swept and Garnished*. The last two are in his volume, *A Diversity of Creatures* (1917). But Homer, three thousand years ago, was dealing with the same material; and after him Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. The things not dreamed of in the philosophy of the average man have always been favorite subjects for masterpieces. And, naturally, they involve difficulty. It will not do to let one's imagination become cobwebbed or mossgrown. Shelley was almost always living in the clouds; his best descriptions are of some aspect of the sky. How different from Pope, who was always to be found on the comforting levels of "sense"! The consistency with which most of the writers of his period clung to this good sense, or common sense—which is perhaps better named matter-of-fact-ness—explains much of their limpidity and their appeal to unimaginative readers. Swift, however, it must not be forgotten, exhibited a singularly

powerful and sane imagination. Wordsworth held, in his *Intimations of Immortality*, that children live nearest to the supernatural—that “Heaven lies about us in our infancy” and that the adult gradually sees this magic light change into that of common day. The supernatural on its reflective side, however, portrayed so profoundly in *Hamlet*, appeals rather to the wisdom of maturity. *The Tempest* is more fanciful, less serious; but the vision of the dissolving of the great globe itself, “like this insubstantial pageant faded,” is justly one of the most celebrated quotations in literature. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and the master will always, in defiance of possible obscurity, emphasize this mystical element in human existence. Great writers do not defer to stupidity. They will be as clear as their subjects allow them to be; but even they themselves see sometimes as in a glass darkly. It is well, says Mr. Chesterton, to half understand a poem as we half understand life. This is a wise justification of the necessary difficulties of literature of the highest order.

Good writing is a personal vision of life. Knowledge of one masterpiece helps us, to some extent, to understand others; yet each is highly individualized. The familiar maxim, “style is the man,” suggests this. On the other hand, natural science aims at establishing similarities—which it promptly calls laws or hypotheses. Conformity is the soul of science; non-conformity, the soul of literature. “’Sblood,” says Hamlet, “do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?” The reader of masterpieces must do more than “govern the ventages” with fingers and thumb; he must acquire, perhaps painfully, the art of playing on the instrument of literature. Popular magazines are a kind of player-piano which require little skill from the reader; or to speak more accurately, they are in a majority of their pages literature reduced to its lowest terms, simplified for the multitude. But life itself is not simple, not wholly intelligible; and good literature, which reflects it, must be correspondingly difficult. To ask a great writer to be absolutely plain is to ask him to be as stupid as we are.

HARRY T. BAKER.